

December \_\_, 2008

Fran Randolph  
Director  
Division of Services and System Improvement  
Center for Mental Health  
1 Choke Cherry Lane, Room 6-1037  
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Ms. Randolph:

We, the undersigned organizations, ask that, SAMHSA and the Center for Mental Health Services continue funding the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR) initiative in FY 2009.

The recent economic downturn is already fraying the support networks available to America's most vulnerable citizens. SOAR has become a proven strategy which helps people experiencing homelessness access the federal disability benefits for which they are eligible but face barriers to receiving. Under SOAR, case managers and other front line service providers are taught how to collect the relevant information from clients that the Social Security Administration needs to determine SSI/SSDI eligibility. This information includes timely client observations and assessments by trained case managers and clinicians. Initial acceptance rates for SSI/SSDI at sites using the SOAR approach are now at 70% and occurring on average within 93 days. For clients who do not have access to the SOAR approach, the application process can take months and it is not uncommon for it to take 2 -3 years. During this wait, people who are homeless often have no income and no health insurance and struggle to meet their basic needs.

As you know, once clients receive disability payments, they have improved access to health care, mental health treatment and other social services. For homeless service providers, the clients' income makes it easier to help them find permanent housing options. Not only can clients pay a portion of their rent, the improved access to services increases the likelihood that they can stay housed.

Finally, the SOAR initiative operates through a train-the-trainer model. Therefore, using federal dollars to train one person will see that investment multiply as that trainer goes into other communities and trains additional staff. This is in keeping with SAMHSA's history of being a catalyst for larger state and local system integration and improvement.

As organizations working with people experiencing homelessness with mental health and substance use challenges, we have witnessed how the SOAR initiative has become a critical tool for ending homelessness.

We commend your current efforts to provide mental health and substance use treatment services to those experiencing homelessness and look forward to future partnerships with SAMHSA.

Sincerely,